Jamie Dodgers by Gavin Whitaker.

The Village Hall had seen better days, smelling of the unholy threesome that was damp, dust and digestive biscuits, still no one but Nigel Bagshaw seemed to notice. It was 1974 and amateur dramatics group 'The Players most Priestley' had spent weeks transforming the space

into a 1940s airfield: sandbags stacked like graves, a mock Spitfire wing splintered from balsa, and a battered wireless crooning Vera Lynn between scenes. Tonight was the premiere of the play "The Brave who did not Bend" their earnest tribute to those who fought in the second world war, penned and directed by Aubrey Hargreaves, who had never forgiven history for rejecting him before he could even play a role in it. Aubrey had been eighteen in 1940, slender and sharp-featured, with a high voice that commanded second looks. When he presented himself at the recruiting office, full of patriotic fervour and a secret longing to be among men in uniform, the medical officer had taken one look, and said "I'm afraid you're too light on your feet for the service, old chap" sarcastically adding "why don't you try to help the war effort in another way, like taking up knitting".
What an absolute bitch, Aubrey had privately thought, his papers had been marked "unfit" and Aubrey knew why. The army didn't want men who loved other men, didn't want queens even if they were willing to die for their King. The rejection burned deeper than any wound he might have earned in battle; resulting in a lifetime of directing village plays, mainly about young men in uniform and the heroism Aubrey was never allowed to share.

However Nigel Bagshaw—postman by day, thespian by delusion—carried his own ghosts from a different era. In 1960, during national service his commanding officer, Captain Ivor Dodgers, had made his life a living hell: endless punishments, verbal floggings, and nights scrubbing decks until his hands bled. All these years later Nigel could still hear Dodgers' voice bellowing "get on parade, you great big, useless turd", "dirty sod, you'll go blind doing that or end up in a mental

asylum" and "Bagshaw, you're only fit to sweep the bleeding streets". The Captain's paranoia had grown worse after he began to suspect his young wife, Edna, of infidelity. Dodgers fixated on Nigel, convinced the quiet, watchful rating was secretly rogering Edna. Nigel knew better. He had never had the pleasure of Edna —never even been alone with her—but he had overheard the whispers in the barracks, seen the knowing smirks. Edna was a right goer, a bloody nymphomaniac in fact. She had been entertaining two, sometimes three of the other lads at once, wild, laughing matings in the married quarters while Dodgers was away on exercises. Nigel kept silent, but silence was enough to feed the Captain's jealousy. That dark, stormy night off the Cornish coast, when Dodgers insisted on he and Nigel setting out to sea in a small boat—just the two of them—Nigel was certain the Captain meant to kill him. He saw murder in Dodgers' eyes, felt it in the way the man's hand lingered near his coat pocket. Nigel struck first. As thunder cracked and waves lashed the hull, he seized a rusted fish knife, tackled the Captain from behind and slit Dodgers' throat in one ragged stroke. Blood sprayed hot across Dodgers' face, black in the lightning flashes—thick arterial ropes that painted the gunwale and dripped into the sea in steaming ribbons. Nigel heaved the twitching body overboard, watching it vanish into the churning foam. He panicked; he hadn't really thought this through at all. Would the sea keep his secret like a trusted mistress? or would Dodgers' corpse incriminate him by washing up on shore a few days later? Suddenly the sea turned red around the small boat, multiple crimson bubbles rising to the surface as something feasted below. *Sharks?* wondered Nigel...*no surely we don't have sharks in Cornwall, perhaps Piranhas...no, don't be such a silly sod*, Nigel told himself. He had to know what beast or beasts had come to his aid, then he saw

them clearly for the first time, horror set in as shapes rose from the depths. Several sea sirens, their scales iridescent and jagged, swarming around Dodgers' corpse. *Blimey, they're starkers*, Nigel thought, *totally bleeding naked*. Sure, he'd seen a girlie magazine before, even copped a feel of Doreen in the back row of the local fleapit, but these birds were something else. Truth be told, Nigel had never seen a woman totally naked before, nor had he seen a woman tear into male flesh with needle teeth, ripping it in bloody chunks. Nor had he seen a woman tear a liver free, shred lungs into pink froth, or pluck out a still-beating heart and devour it in glistening bites.

I clearly still have allot to learn about women, Nigel thought.

A mixture of fear and arousal overcame him, as could only be expected from a man who suddenly found himself surrounded by naked birds who were also bloodthirsty cannibals. He ran to the opposite side of the boat and retched into the sea. Then he saw her—perched on a jagged rock amid the storm. Her pale skin glistening with saltwater sheen, shoulder-length, reddish-brown hair with soft curls framing her face, a strong jaw line, full breasts heaving with each sultry breath, nipples hardened against the cold wind. Her curves were hypnotic, hips flaring wide in invitation, the promise of ecstasy and ruin.

'My name is Jamie'... he could hear her seductively say that in his head, though he wasn't sure if she had actually spoken those words in person. Her eyes like shattered peridot fixed on him, lips curved in a lascivious smile that parted to reveal sharp, pearl-white teeth. She called out in a voice that pierced the gale: “Murderer… Murderer… Murderer…”

Over and over, her laughter mingling with the sirens’ feeding frenzy below. Her throaty, erotic moan stirred unwelcome heat in Nigel’s loins even as terror gripped the rest of him. He rowed away, leaving behind a

bloodbath of apocalyptic proportions, but the sea siren's accusation haunted him through the decades. He imagined her whispering to him in rain-slicked streets, saw her nude form flickering in steam-fogged pub windows, then there was the odd looks he'd gotten from birds over the years, when, during sex, he cried out the name 'Jamie'. The memory of her full breasts threatened his sanity, thoughts of her hips grinding in slow, teasing circles, mentally branding him anew each time with a mix of lust and dread.

The Village Hall was packed. From behind the stage curtains, Aubrey smiled, peeking at a large crowd, some members of the audience had even travelled from as far away as Scunthorpe to see the play. There were old men in blazers pinned with tarnished medals, their wives in wartime coats frayed at the hems, grandchildren fidgeting about, brought against their will for “a bit of culture.” Aubrey hoped that an encounter with amateur dramatics might steer the younger members of the audience away from watching too much television, mugging old ladies or taking up glue sniffing. Backstage, Nigel tunelessly wailed away in an infuriating and loud fashion, for not only did he fancy himself as a masterful actor, but he also thought he had what it took to be a great singer as well. "Mark my words, one day I'll be as big as Barry Blue and Zenda Jacks" was something told to all of the Players most Priestley, and believed by none of them.
"I bet you didn't know I could sing like what they do in opera, Aubrey" said Nigel as he walked past the fey, limp wristed theatre director, not waiting for a reply.
"Well, I sure knew you weren't a fucking actor" Aubrey muttered to himself.

The lights dimmed. The curtain shuddered upward. The play demanded atmosphere, and Aubrey was determined to give his audience some showbiz razzmatazz. To evoke a battleground, the Players Most Priestley had borrowed a fog machine from a shuttered pantomime troupe. Aubrey had also been delighted when in the basement of the Village Hall they had discovered a sealed military drum, the perfect prop for his play. Unbeknownst to the Players most Priestley was the fact that the sealed drum contained a deadly gas, the discarded result of a long forgotten attempt by the government to find a cure for rabies. Onstage, Squadron Leader Alistair Thorne (Nigel in a cardboard helmet) built to his big speech about a fallen comrade, which in the context of the play he had come to deliver to the truelove of Thorne's decreased friend. Nigel had rehearsed the words in his head many times over “They found him at first light, expired on the battlefield. Poor Digby. He was killed by a German paratrooper". Nigel's eyes flicked to the audience, anticipating the big dramatic moment in the play when they discovered Digby's tragic fate. Nigel scanned the dim rows. There—third row centre, amid the sea of grey hair and horn rimmed spectacles—a figure that shouldn’t be there. Pale skin glistening like wet kelp, her body arched mockingly in a pose of raw seduction, full breasts thrust forward, nipples erect and begging for his touch, dripping with an otherworldly allure that made Nigel’s pulse throb with forbidden desire. Eyes glowing faintly green. Jamie. Totally bare...the shameless hussy...worse still she was dripping water all over the floor of the Village Hall. Jamie leaned forward, lips parting to deliver the words only he could hear: Murderer… Murderer…Murderer—her voice a husky whisper that caressed his ears like velvet, promising pleasures that would drown him in ecstasy. Nigel’s throat seized. Panic flooded

him, the storm's chill resurfacing in his veins, mingled with a shameful arousal. Then, fighting against what the audience assumed was stage fright, Nigel said the words..."They found him at first light, expired on the battlefield. Poor Digby. He was killed by a German parrot."

Laughter erupted, sharp and unwelcome from an audience hit directly in the funny bone with the mental image of an evil parrot, driven by Nazi ideology, squawking 'Heil Hitler' before flying kamikaze style at poor Digby. An elderly, former wing commander rose in his seat, shaking his fist at the stage, "What disrespectful rot this is!" But Nigel stared, transfixed, as Jamie's nude form dissolved into shadow, her whisper lingering: *Murderer... Murderer… Murderer*—her imagined touch ghosting over his skin, fingers trailing fire down his spine. Nigel stumbled around the stage, accidentally knocking over the sealed drum. Yellow-green vapour billowed from the stage, thick and oily, cascading into the stalls like a tidal wave of rot. At first, the crowd thought it theatrical flair, as they'd come to expect from Aubrey Hargreaves. Then Mrs. Prudence Protheroe in row three convulsed, her spine arching until her vertebrae cracked audibly. She clawed at her throat, nails gouging bloody furrows through wrinkled skin. Her mouth gaped in a silent scream before a geyser of blood-streaked bile erupted, followed by her stomach and intestines—slick, glistening ropes that slithered out in pulsating loops, splattering hot across her neighbours' laps. Her husband beside her inhaled the gas and his face began to melt: skin bubbling and sliding off in translucent sheets, exposing raw muscle that twitched and wept crimson. In blind agony he dug his fingers into his own cheeks, ripping downward in long strips, peeling his face away to the bone in wet, sucking sounds, teeth clacking as the

lower jaw hung by threads of tendon. Panic ignited. The former wing commander clutched his abdomen as his intestines burst through the wall of his belly in a sudden, wet explosion—coils of purple-grey bowel spilling over his medals in steaming heaps, blood pumping in rhythmic spurts from severed vessels. An old woman nearby shrieked as her eyes liquefied and burst, thick yellow fluid mixed with blood spraying in arcs; she raked her nails across her own scalp, tearing away hair and skin in bloody handfuls until skull gleamed white. Children screamed as beloved grandparents disemboweled themselves—fingers plunging into softening abdomens to haul out livers and spleens in quivering masses, arteries severed and fountaining dark red across the seats. Faces disintegrated under frantic claws: eyelids shredded, lips torn to ragged ribbons, tongues lolling in shredded mouths as victims tried to scream through collapsing throats. The floor became a slaughterhouse — gallons of blood, bile, and liquefied organs mingling into a viscous lake that lapped at ankles. Bodies slumped half-eviscerated, ribs cracked open like wet cages, hearts still fluttering weakly amid exposed cavities. Thinking fast, Aubrey made for a cardboard box containing gas masks for the play, distributing them to the Players most Priestley as they scarpered around backstage. Aubrey then yanked the fire alarm; it wailed like a siren's call. The curtain went down, trapping the audience in a fog-shrouded tomb. By the time the fire brigade breached the doors, forty lay dead, bodies twisted in grotesque tableaux: torsos flayed open, entrails draped like garlands, faces reduced to glistening skulls half-covered in hanging meat, pools of blood and viscera inches deep across the floorboards.

Hours later, amid the flashing lights and the stench of death, Nigel sat

on the edge of the stage, gas mask in his lap, nearly catatonic. Over and over he repeated: “German Parrot… German Parrot…Murderer....Murderer...Murderer”.

The siren...her call...Nigel's memory returned to that night, recalling details in more clarity than ever before. Long forgotten, long hidden memories. Captain Dodgers had brought aboard a crate of rusted drums marked with hazard symbols, the leftovers from an attempt to find a cure for rabies. Dodgers had taken a backhander to ensure they met with an illegal, deep-sea disposal.

“Get rid of them, do it bloody well now Bagshaw,” Dodgers had barked. “No bleeding questions. No bleeding records.”

They had heaved most overboard, the heavy drums vanishing into the black water with hollow splashes. Neither man could have suspected that their actions would cause gross offense to a sisterhood of sea sirens. Nigel, convinced the whole exercise was a ruse to isolate and murder him, had waited until only one drum remained. Then he had struck—slitting Dodgers’ throat in one ragged stroke. In the panic of escape, Nigel had forgotten about the final drum. He rowed to shore, hid it in the basement of the Village Hall under a pile of old hymnals, and buried the memory of the drum as deep as the captain’s body. He never thought of the drum again—until tonight. Why tonight, of all nights had Jamie and Dodgers decided to haunt his memories. It was if Dodgers had risen from the grave to thwart Nigel's acting career...aided and abetted by that trollop from the sea.

A young constable named Harris approached cautiously, notebook in one hand, a packet of biscuits in the other—pilfered from the neighbouring tea room where Aubrey and the rest of the Players most

Priestley were being comforted.
“Mr. Bagshaw? Nigel? Here, have one of these" he produced a packet of Jammie Dodgers "Might settle the nerves a bit old chap.”
He held out the biscuit, red jam glistening in the middle like fresh blood.
Jammie...Jamie...Dodgers!!!
The names collided in Nigel’s shattered mind, the captain’s bloodied throat flashing before him, the secret he had kept about Edna’s real lovers, Jamie’s naked accusation rising with it—her body writhing in his visions. Murderer… Murderer…With a guttural cry that echoed through the ruined hall, Nigel lunged. His fist drove upward in a savage arc, connecting squarely with the policeman’s groin. Harris doubled over instantly, a high-pitched wheeze escaping him as he crumpled to the floor, knees drawn up in fetal agony, hands clutching protectively over his bollocks. His mind overwhelmed by fears of never being able to achieve fatherhood. Nigel didn’t look back. He vaulted from the Village Hall, shoving past stunned paramedics, and vanished into the fog-shrouded night. The government inquiry predictably covered up the rusted drum and it's deadly contents. Nigel was never found. Three nights later, on a moonless tide, a lone figure walked the shingle at Priestley Cove. Nigel, barefoot and coatless, waded into the black water until it reached his waist, his chest, his throat. The cold no longer bit; it welcomed him like an old friend. Jamie rose first, naked and radiant, her voluptuous form undulating with predatory grace—breasts full and swaying, nipples taut with hunger, drawing him in with a siren’s primal allure. Her sisters circled beneath like pale shadows, their own nude bodies twisting in eager anticipation, tails flicking sprays of foam. She smiled—no longer accusing, but ravenous, her tongue darting out to

taste the air, lips plump and parted in a moan of desire. They had waited decades for this meal, patient as the sea itself. Dodgers had been an appetiser, snatched too quickly. Nigel was the main course: guilt-marinated, tenderised by years of torment. He did not struggle as webbed claws raked his clothes away and needle teeth sank into living flesh. Skin tore in long strips from his back and thighs; muscle parted with wet, sucking sounds as chunks were ripped free and devoured. Blood poured into the water in thick clouds as arteries were severed—femoral, brachial, carotid—each bite sending fresh gouts spiraling into the dark. His abdomen was split open, intestines hauled out in steaming ropes and fought over, liver torn free in a hot, slippery mass. Ribs cracked like kindling as they burrowed to the heart, still beating, still trying to pump what little blood remained. Jamie's mouth latched onto his throat, her breasts pressing hot against his chest in a final, twisted embrace, her body writhing against him in ecstatic feeding, the line between consumption and carnal union blurring in the bloody froth. He was worth the wait.